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SUBJECT: AFGHANS PROTEST ISRAEL, U.S. OVER GAZA

Classified By: A/DCM Valerie Fowler for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY. Thousands of Afghans took part in protests this week over Israeli military operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Some protesters voiced anger at perceived U.S. support for the Israeli government and over Palestinian civilian casualties, two themes that also resonated in insurgent propaganda. Afghan media and political leaders spoke out strongly against Israel's actions as demonstrations cropped up in Kabul and several provincial centers. Pro-Western Afghans, taken aback by the passionate and well-organized displays of anti-Israel and anti-U.S. anger, suspect Iranian involvement in stoking the fires of an Afghan population normally more ambivalent to the Palestinian cause. In a conversation with NDS Director Saleh, the Ambassador advised close vigilance over the demonstrations' sponsors and action only if illicit armed groups appeared to be forming. End summary.

Afghans Take to the Streets Nationwide

2. (SBU) More than 2,000 protesters took to the streets in a January 2 protest in downtown Kabul near Camp Eggers. Protesters chanted anti-Israel and anti-U.S. slogans, accusing the two governments of genocide against Palestinians. Other Kabul protests, including "Death to America" chants and burning flags, drew crowds in the hundreds and briefly closed some streets. Protests also occurred in Nangarhar, Kandahar, Herat, Parwan, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Asadabad, Takhar, Kapisa, Laghman and Khost provinces.

3. (SBU) In Herat, some 400 people gathered at the Friday Mosque, eventually moving the rally to the governor's compound and another religious shrine. Many event organizers are linked to Herat strongman (and current Energy Minister) Ismail Khan's wing of the Jamiat-e-Milli party. About 500 men attended a protest in Kunduz city, where the heads of the provincial council and ulema council spoke out against Israel. Tensions flared, with protesters throwing rocks at police, who responded by firing shots into the air. Two police officers and one demonstrator sustained injuries.

Afghan Intel Chief: Demonstrations "Contrary to Afghan Law"

4. (C) NDS Director Saleh told the Ambassador that recent demonstrations in Kabul and other parts of the country calling for Afghans to join the Palestinian jihad were contrary to Afghan law. Nonetheless, a number of prominent and wealthy Afghans were patronizing these demonstrations. The Ambassador agreed such demonstrations were troubling, adding that the U.S. was unhappy with the situation in Gaza and was counseling all sides to show restraint. He encouraged the Afghans to maintain close vigilance over the sponsors and activists behind the demonstrations, but to take action only

if it appeared an illicit armed group was forming.

Insurgents Co-Opt Issue for Propaganda

15. (U) Insurgent groups have attempted to associate the presence of Coalition forces here with the actions of the Israeli military. A Hezb-e-Islami/Gulbuddin (HIG) spokesman told Afghan media a suicide bombing in Parwan near a U.S. military convoy was in response to "criminal operations in Gaza." That attack killed two Afghan civilians and wounded 18 more, in addition to two U.S. soldiers. A Taliban statement that received wide press coverage called Israel's invasion of Palestinian territory an "invasion of Islamic rights" and urged Muslim countries to unite in opposition to Western "invasions of Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq."

Elite and Media Have Their Say Too

16. (U) Afghanistan's religious authorities and politicians have criticized Israel's actions. In a January 6 statement welcoming visiting Pakistan President Zardari, President Karzai condemned Israel's assault on Gaza and called on the international community to end bombing attacks on civilians. The national Ulema Council of religious scholars urged the UN to intervene to stop Israel's attacks. The National United Council of Afghanistan, a collection of prominent academics and religious figures, said Israel was leading the "devil's war against humanity." The scholars also condemned Arab governments for their silence. Parliament, currently in recess, did not issue an official statement, but several MPs

KABUL 00000046 002 OF 002

criticized the U.S. in media appearances.

17. (U) In recent days, state-owned and private news outlets have widely reported on anti-Israel protests across Afghanistan. In a December 29 press conference, Presidential Spokesman Humayoon Hamidzada said the government of Afghanistan condemned "Israel's attacks on innocent Palestinians," and demanded an immediate halt to operations. Almost all Afghan daily newspapers ran editorials condemning the attacks on Gaza in strong terms, calling on Israel to halt its operations and asking the international community to create a plan to end the violence. Weesa Daily, an independent pro-government newspaper, also covered the Afghan Ulema Council's call for the Organization of the Islamic Conference to stop the violence and end Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip. Afghan media sources have privately claimed that anti-Israeli protests are known to be organized and supported by Iranian groups.

Iranian Elements Suspected of Organizing Some Protests

18. (C) The ferocity of the protests in a country whose population is usually more ambivalent toward Israeli-Palestinian issues led a number of pro-Western Afghans to suspect Iranian involvement. Deputy National Security Advisor Spenzada said popular rallies for Palestinians are a rarity, with Afghans historically disengaged from those causes. Other contacts believed individuals working for the Iranian government, either covertly or out of Iranian-funded cultural centers, were directly involved in the protests and manipulated the public messages to have a more anti-US tilt. One moderate Hazara political leader claimed Sunni groups were behind most of the protests, but recognized others suspected an Iranian hand. He feared these suspicions would tarnish his ethnic group as an Iranian puppet due to the Shia connection.

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